

2001

## **"Crossing the Border": Constructions of National Character in U.S.-Mexico Transnational Travel Narratives**

John D. Hazlett  
*University of New Orleans, jhazlett@uno.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl_facpubs)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Hazlett, John D. "Crossing the Border": Constructions of National Character in U.S.-Mexico Transnational Travel Narratives." *Actas del V Congreso del SAAS (Spanish Association of American Studies)*. Universidad de Salamanca (Spain). 3-5 April 2001. pp. 51-65.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English and Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

## "Crossing the Border": Constructions of National Character in U.S.-Mexico Transnational Travel Narratives<sup>1</sup>

JOHN HAZLETT  
*University of New Orleans*

We can all reach the point of knowing ourselves to be Mexicans. It is enough, for example, simply to cross the border. . . (Octavio Paz, 12)

In the field of autobiography studies, very little is being written these days about national character. Probably, this has something to do with the present intellectual climate in which discussion of collective "types" of any kind has become difficult. In the U.S., talking about national character is somewhat less charged than talking about the character of Jews or Blacks or Gays, but it is nonetheless charged. Sensitive as we are to the charge of romanticizing or demonizing the "Other," North Americans have become fearful of reinforcing a stereotype or cultural caricature. As a result, we feel very uncomfortable with almost all characterizations of collectives, and especially of national, racial, ethnic, or gender groups. That discomfort no doubt has many sources, ranging from our knowledge of the horrific crimes that have been committed against specific groups and justified, in part, on the grounds of such characterizations, to our conviction that collective identities are always, to greater or lesser degree, fictions constructed to serve particular political ends. We also feel uncomfortable making such generalizations because of the potential harm they do to those who make them. What becomes of a people who sum up some "Other" with a few sweeping generalizations? History is replete with cultures that spend generations atoning for having characterized a particular people in a way that allows them to be exploited, neglected, converted, dismissed, or exterminated. The business of "assigning" national character is indeed a dangerous one.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank T.R. Johnson and Joyce Zonana for their perceptive criticisms of an early version of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> No one has made this danger clearer than scholars such as Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt, whose work on European travel narratives is clearly relevant to the concerns of the present study.



Before the current climate became so entrenched, however, writers felt free to attack essentialist stereotyping and nationalist chauvinism without feeling that collective characterizations themselves were off limits as a topic of intellectual discourse. If there are cultural groups, they reasoned, then those groups must hold some attitudes and behaviors in common that set them apart from other groups. Our paranoia about such talk has almost frozen all discourse on the subject. This, it seems to me, is unfortunate. One shudders for the human race when groups speak evil of one another, but it is even worse if they refrain from talking to each other at all about their respective values and habits. This is especially true now, as mostly first world countries attempt to accommodate large numbers of new immigrants from different nations, each with its distinct values, manners, and ways of seeing the world. The consequences of these migrations are that many countries—the U.S. most conspicuously among them—are having to re-examine their identities and core values. That re-examination is taking place, but unfortunately practically the only voices contributing to the project are Aryan Nation nationalists and other racial purists whose notions of national character have been most responsible for the collapse of all rational discourse on the subject. People of good will, fearful of being identified with such hate talk, avoid the conversation altogether.

What is necessary at this juncture in our history, however, is not flight from dialogue, but more dialogue, more knowledge about our diversity and about the national cultures from which our various populations come. One way to promote such dialogue would be to reconstruct a history of national characterizations, both our own characterizations of others and others' characterizations of us. To look at those characterizations, to see how they have changed, and to see how historical, political, and economic circumstances or ideology have shaped them will tell us something about their contingent and constructed nature without denying their reality. Most important, such an examination would help initiate a dialogue between peoples rather than perpetuate a monologue delivered by one culture on the subject of another. In this essay, I intend to begin to look at how national character has been constructed historically in the autobiographical subgenre most directly concerned with that task, the *transnational travel narrative*. By this phrase, I mean writing that provides a first-person narrative of a journey across a national boundary in order to provide, among other things, an account of the national identity and culture of the visited country to the author's compatriots. In these narratives, the author always re-crosses the border and returns home. My attention will focus primarily on one aspect of national identity, that is, on national character. For theorists such as Benedict Anderson, national identity is a construct made up of those traits and characteristics that individuals believe give a particular community its national status, such as shared myths, language, history, public culture, territory, economic units, and legal order.<sup>3</sup> National character, on the other hand, is a more limited construct comprised of those traits that

---

3 A useful book on the subject of autobiography and national identity is Steven V. Hun-saker's recent *Autobiography and National Identity in the Americas* (1999).



individuals believe make up the personality of the imagined collective self of a national group. National character may be shaped by national identity and overlap with it in some respects, but it is not synonymous with it.<sup>4</sup>

As especially illuminating case studies, I have focused on two traditions of transnational travel writing: one written by North Americans who have traveled in Mexico and another written by Mexicans who have traveled in the U.S.<sup>5</sup> In choosing works that might be used in this discussion, I quickly discovered that there are many authors on the North American side, which possesses a rich tradition of travel narratives set in Mexico. Drewrey Wayne Gunn, the pre-eminent scholar of this field, published a survey of the tradition in 1974 that listed over 600 memoirs, travel accounts, and "other personal observations about Mexico" written by British and U.S. authors. Of these 600, the great majority are North American. Although North Americans began writing about Mexico almost as soon as the Mexican War of Independence ended in 1821, the most notable works in the tradition do not appear until the 1840s, with Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), John Lloyd Stephen's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841), and Frances Erskine Inglis Calderón de la Barca's *Life in Mexico* (1843). Sixty years later, Charles Flandrau's *Viva Mexico!* (1908) written near the end of the Porfiriato and John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), in praise of Pancho Villa's revolution, continued the tradition. Other writers include Jack London, Katherine Anne Porter, B. Traven, John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Carlos Castaneda. Within the past couple of decades, North Americans have produced a new spate of travel narratives set in Mexico, including works by Mary Morris, Ronald Wright, Luis Alberto Urrea, Tony Cohan, and Terry Pindell.

The same impressive numbers do not exist on the Mexican side. This is at least partly the result, one might guess, of the inevitable relationship between travel writing and privilege. Travel writers are almost by definition people with money and time on their hands, as well as the cultural habit of seeing themselves and their readers as entitled observers of foreign and exotic Others. There have been more of these luxuries and habits on the U.S. than on the Mexican side of the border. In addition, North Americans have always been a very mobile population, with relatively shallow roots in their natal lands. On the other side,

---

4 According to David D. Latin and Susan M. Gordon, the study of "national character" was initiated by the anthropological school of "culture and personality." In the field of social-psychology, "national character" is termed "modal personality," that is, a personality that appears in a society with "considerable frequency." The best known researcher in the field, Alex Inkeles, has attempted to base its study as a social phenomenon on scientific principles. For a brief overview of Inkeles' work, see Latin and Gordon's review of his *National Character in The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28 (Winter 1998), 429-31.

5 For the sake of convenience, I will use the term "North American" throughout this essay to designate writers from the U.S. I do so, acknowledging its geographical vagueness, for lack of a more convenient term in English. I also use it because I have the support of all of the Mexican authors whose works I examine here. None of them uses the term "*estadounidense*"; all of them call citizens of the U.S. either "*norteamericanos*" or, most commonly, simply "*americanos*." Some of them use the term "*yanquis*."



the relative paucity of Mexican travel writing set in the U.S. may have several explanations. If the Mexican authors themselves are trustworthy guides, it may have something to do with Mexican disdain for U.S. culture and distrust of U.S. institutions. In addition, many Mexican travel writers argue that their culture is a sedentary one, and that Mexicans, in general, travel only when forced to do so.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of this, there is a self-conscious tradition of Mexican travel writing set in the U.S. that is well worth examining and comparing to its northern counterpart. It begins with Lorenzo de Zavala's *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de América* (1834), and includes Rafael Reynal and Carlos Gastelu's *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte* (1834), Justo Sierra O'Reilly's *Impresiones de un Viaje a los Estados Unidos de América y Canadá* (1846) and his later *Diario de nuestro viaje a los Estados Unidos* (1848), Guillermo Prieto's *Viaje a los Estados Unidos por Fidel* (1877-78), Alberto Lombardo's *Los Estados Unidos: notas y episodios de viaje* (1884), Justo Sierra's *En tierra yankee: notas a todo vapor* (1898), Carlos González Peña's *La vida tumultuosa: seis semanas en los Estados Unidos* (1918), José Vasconcelos' *Visiones Californianas* (1919), Salvador Novo's *Return Ticket* (1928) and *Continente Vacío* (1934), Alfonso Reyes' *Viaje a California* (1941, published 1990), Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), Jorge Ibargüengoitia's parodic *Viajes en la América ignota* (1972),<sup>7</sup> and José Agustín's fictional *Ciudades desiertas* (1982). Very few of these works have ever been made available in English translation to the largely monolingual North American public.<sup>8</sup> The general lack of translations of most of these works has deprived the non-Spanish reading North American public of a vision of themselves that they would inevitably find edifying.

---

6 There is, of course, another kind of travel literature in which the proportions I've just discussed are more or less reversed, and that is immigrant literature. Examples of immigrant autobiography by Mexicans who have moved to the U.S., almost always for pressing economic reasons, are easy enough to find, and American Chicano Studies is now an established field that takes such works as foundational texts. There is a much smaller body of works written by U.S. immigrants living in Mexico, but of these expatriate narratives, the ones that I have read—Tony Cohan's *On Mexican Time* (2000) is the best example—strike me as having much more in common with transnational travel narrative than with immigrant literature. Cohan's primary source of income, after all, is non-Mexican and his book jacket informs us that he maintains residences in Mexico and California.

7 Reyes' short narrative, an account of a trip taken by Buick from Mexico City to Berkeley, California in 1941, was not published in his lifetime, and is now available, thanks to José Luis Martínez, in *Obras completas de Alfonso Reyes. XXIV. Memorias*, Colección Letras Mexicanas. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990. pp. 95-116. Jorge Ibargüengoitia's book is actually a collection of essays, only some of which recount trips he has taken to the U.S.

8 Lorenzo de Zavala's book was translated largely because the author, considered a traitor by many Mexicans, served for a short time as the first vice-president of the Republic of Texas, where he is still seen as a hero. Brief selections from Guillermo Prieto's three volume travel narrative, *Viaje a los Estados Unidos*, have also been published under the titles, *San Francisco in the Seventies: The City as Viewed by a Mexican Political Exile* (Translated by Edwin S. Morby. San Francisco: Nash, 1938. 90 pages) and *Travels in Texas, 1866-1867 and 1877* (Translated by Judy Cole Briscoe. Fort Worth: Briscoe, 1967. 119 pages). Morby's text is a translation of selections from volume 1. Briscoe's is an M.A. thesis that translates only chapters 21-23 of volume 3.



I pick these two travel writing traditions for a number of reasons. First, although some scholarship exists on U.S. travel narratives set in Mexico, little has been said about the way in which North American authors have used their travels to explore the concept of national character. Second, almost no North American scholarship treats travel narratives written by authors who have traveled to the U.S. from Latin America. This omission appears odd when we consider how much has been written about European travelers in the U.S. such as de Tocqueville, the two Trollopes, Dickens, and, most recently, Baudrillard.<sup>9</sup> However compelling these European books may be, the neglect of authors from places like Mexico is clearly the result of the historical privileging of European perspectives (especially British and French) in American cultural studies. Certainly, the neglect cannot be based on the quality of the works themselves, for authors such as Guillermo Prieto, Justo Sierra, and Salvador Novo are highly esteemed in Mexico, and their travel narratives are remarkable literary, as well as cultural, documents. Finally, both of these literary traditions, when set along side of each other, allow us to examine how a writer's sense of his or her own national character is determined, at least in part, by the attempt to define and construct the national character of the "other." For writers in both traditions, that "otherness" has been affected by the long and mostly difficult relationship the two countries have had with each other and the iconic role that each country has played within the other's national mythology. One need only think of the role of Mexico in North America's Alamo mythology to realize how "necessary" certain views of that country have at times been to our sense of who we are, and anyone familiar with Mexican culture will know the similar role that the U.S. plays in the Mexican legend of the beloved "*niños héroes*."<sup>10</sup> The dialogue constituted by a mutual examination of these literary traditions will help us to engage in the kind of conversation about our respective values that I have called for in the opening pages of this essay.

It would have been convenient if the writers from these two traditions had been aware of each other, but in fact, most of them seem to be only slightly conscious of their transnational counterparts. The Americans are perhaps a little deaf in this regard than the Mexicans. I can think of no American authors before 1970 who cite a Mexican author who has traveled in the U.S.; after that date, Octavio Paz's international reputation made him visible to some North American travel writers who mention his work, but they often limit their citations to what he has to say about Mexico, not the U.S. On the Mexican side, awareness of American and British writers seems to have been a feature of the tradition from the very beginning. In fact, one of the first texts in it, Rafael Reynal's 1834 *Viage por los Estados Unidos del Norte*, complains about a British travel narrative, William

---

9 Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (2 vols., 1835). Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842). Anthony Trollope, *North America* (1862). Jean Baudrillard *Amérique* (1988).

10 The "*niños héroes*" were the young cadets who defended Chapultepec Castle against the U.S. Marines during the North American invasion of Mexico in 1847. In an act of defiant self-martyrdom, the young heroes are said to have wrapped themselves in the Mexican flag and hurled themselves from the castle's ramparts.



Bullock's *Six Months' Residence and Travels in Mexico* (1824). Bullock's travel book, according to Reynal, wildly misrepresented the smoking habits of Mexican women and was in general "full of classic falsities and crass absurdities" (49). Reynal's own book sets the record straight and adds its own commentary on the less then appetizing tobacco habits of North Americans.

But even though these two literary traditions had limited interaction with each other, it will be illuminating to look at them side by side, if for no other reason than to avoid perpetuating the illusion that it is always writers from the first world who do the looking and always people in the third world who serve as the objects of their gaze. I do not claim by this that the texts written by Mexicans represent the "subaltern" voice, if by "subaltern" we mean the oppressed and exploited masses of laborers, peons, and indigenous peoples that make up a large part of the Mexican population. The Mexican texts, like the American ones, are written by members of the comfortable classes and they inevitably reflect those classes' interests. The differences between Mexican and U.S. representations of national character are based on divergent ideas about Mexico and the U.S. within the literate (and usually literary) classes, not on ideas that stem from completely distinct class positions. I'll only be able to give a superficial overview of these works here, but my intention is to provide a general introduction to how these authors deal with the problem of national character construction and to lay the groundwork for a closer study of individual texts.

I take as my starting point this essay's epigraph. It relates an experience that Octavio Paz describes in his famous *Labyrinth of Solitude*. That book, one of the most interesting on the Mexican side, is an extended meditation on Mexican national character, but it is also a travel narrative that occasionally focuses as much on Paz's experiences in the United States as it does on his vision of Mexico. Here's what Paz says in his opening pages about how he came to start thinking about Mexican character:

We can all reach the point of knowing ourselves to be Mexicans. It is enough, for example, simply to cross the border: almost at once we begin to ask ourselves, at least vaguely, the same questions that Samuel Ramos asked in his *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*. I should confess that many of the reflections in this essay occurred to me outside of Mexico, during a two-year stay in the United States. I remember that whenever I attempted to examine North American life, anxious to discover its meaning, I encountered my own questioning image. That image, seen against the glittering background of the United States, was the first and perhaps the profoundest answer which that country gave to my questions. (12) [my emphasis]

This statement contains two essential truths about travel writing and national character: first, one is never so conscious of national character as when one is traveling in another country, and second, almost all observations about the national character and culture of the "other" serve as a means of defining or clarifying the travel writer's own culture and character.

Paz, of course, was not the first to perceive these effects on transnational travelers. Other Mexican writers, using different metaphors, have made similar points. For example, in *La vida tumultuosa*, Carlos González describes the intensified consciousness of national character brought about by his trip to the



U.S. Curiously inverting and mixing maternal and paternal metaphors, González writes that far from its borders, he found that he carried Mexico "inside of myself, maternal and solicitous. I saw through her eyes and thought for her, and I felt more and more love for her because there, in the depths of my soul, like an only child, I felt that I had her all to myself" (11). When he re-crosses the border on his return, another process is initiated: "when the *patria* stopped being exclusively within me, but –just the reverse– I was back inside of her, then I saw her as greater, loved her more, and fell to my knees ecstatic in the face of her incomparable beauty" (12). There are some striking differences between González's metaphors of possession and the mirroring tropes that Paz uses. González's metaphors of an internalized mother/father that inhabits and possesses him, stripping him of his individuality, suggest that travel provides an intuitive, unmediated understanding of one's national character. He doesn't need to reflect on the meaning of Mexico because the trip allows him, for the first time, to *be* Mexico. He is a new creature who no longer sees with his own eyes, but with the eyes of the collective Mexican nation.

Paz's tropes, by contrast, are more reflective and intellectualized. His image of a mirrored self suggests that the questions he finds himself asking the U.S. will potentially tell him at least as much about his Mexican self as they do about his northern neighbors. If he finds himself asking the question, "why do North Americans care so much about money?" it suggests that Mexicans care about something else. What writers see when they travel is determined in part by its perceived difference from their own culture and national character.<sup>11</sup> Those aspects of the foreign culture that are the same simply recede from view. This is true of the physical as well as the psychological or cultural aspects of the visited place. I remember the first impression I had of Mexico when I crossed the border from Brownsville, Texas to Matamoros, Tamaulipas. It was an apparently trivial thing: the smell of the place –the pervasive odor of wood smoke coming from the city. Such a smell was "foreign" to my experience as a dweller in urban U.S. settings. The odor of smoke (and the ubiquity of *leñadores*, the wood gatherers) was a physical difference that signaled other, more complex, differences between the two cultures, differences in their sense of time, their economies and technologies.

Almost exactly one hundred years before my border crossing, Justo Sierra traveled in the opposite direction, crossing the Rio Grande a few miles upriver. One of his first "impressions" as he traveled by train from Nuevo Laredo to New Orleans is an attractive young girl, about thirteen years old, traveling by herself. She is, he says, a "flower of that civilization in which each person feels himself to *be someone* and manifests it with a certain regal consciousness of his own individuality" (26). For Sierra, however, the most notable thing about her self-

---

11 My colleague, Joyce Zonana, reminds me that the opposite can also occasionally be true, especially today. If one travels to a foreign country with a high expectation of exotic "otherness" and is disappointed, one's narrative of the journey will probably focus on sameness rather than difference: "I went to Guali-Guali, and it was all strip malls, Holiday Inns, and McDonalds! I may as well have stayed home."



possession and independence is that no one notices it, no one even sees it, except a Mexican who has the right to bear witness to the case and to see . . . surreptitiously, for a man who "insists" too much with regard to one of these little *misses* would soon enough find himself the object of her attention, and then of the conductor's . . . And then, here, of my Mexican readers! (26)

In this case, Sierra doesn't comment on what makes the young girl visible to himself and invisible to her own countrymen, but it is clearly implied. The thing that fascinates is, of course, the other, the not-me, or, in the case of transnational travel narratives, the not-us: in 1895, a young girl "of good family" would never travel alone in Mexico, would never possess herself in this fashion. If she did, it would be a certain sign of her sexual availability. The difference causes Sierra's fascination with the girl, but what is most striking about the passage is how Sierra turns the attention back on himself. The mark of the traveler-the stare, the gawk-always carries a kind of threat, both to the person thus observed and to the person who does the observing. Sierra stares at the girl in his role as representative of Mexican culture and character; but outside of Mexico, the stare is potentially reciprocated. There, it is Mexico that is odd. It is Mexico that merits the interrogating gaze. Like González when he is "outside Mexico," Sierra finds Mexico inside himself, which means, of course, that it is smaller, less empowering than it was when it was outside and able to add weight and authority to his gaze. The threat of the returned stare makes Sierra conscious of himself as Mexican, and of Mexico as a place with relative and contingent ways of viewing the world. The image that transnational travel writers produce of other countries is a kind of photographic negative of their own national culture and character. Paz's strategy in *El laberinto* is simply to publish that negative, to make explicit what he learns about Mexico while traveling in the U.S.

I am aware, of course, that other factors contribute to a travel writer's construction of national selves. Besides the traveler's gaze, one often finds in these narratives a learned discourse on the country being visited, including considerations of its historical relations with the writer's own country and contextualizations of cultural and artistic objects. In other words, books—especially those by other travel writers—can stand between travelers and what they see and can play a significant role in their attempts to construct the national character of the place they are visiting. For some writers, these discourses can even overwhelm the concrete experience of traveling. Justo Sierra is again a prime example. He is highly conscious of having already "seen" the places he is visiting for the first time. When he tours the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, for example, he is disheartened that he cannot see the art works because he has *already seen* them reproduced in books and read about them in the writings of the great art critics: "This is the diabolical effect of our eminently book-based education—it lacks movement, it lacks travel, it lacks direct contact with civilization" (138). When we see the real thing, he laments, we simply regurgitate the opinions we have already formed about it from our reading. That same sense of disappointing *deja vu*, one would think, should not interfere with his construction of national character. But at the end of his narrative, after summing up American character in the most unflattering terms—it is bellicose, materialistic,



egoistic, emotionless, ambitious, sexless— he candidly admits that this list of traits is not based on his actual encounters with Americans or their country. “All of these pessimistic thoughts,” he says, “come to me from books that I’ve read about American society, they are book-thoughts [*librescos*]” (192).

By way of caveat, then, one must say at the outset that constructions of national character in travel narratives are almost never objectively grounded. They are based on the author’s reading, on anecdote and selected incidents of travel experience, combined with a process in which the traveler examines an effect—such as urban architecture, military adventurism, or data related to wealth—and then infers a particular kind of national character as the cause.

Almost from the beginning, North American travel writers have worried about what might be termed the “ethics of national character construction.” Most of them have dealt with it by holding, at least implicitly, a distinction between what they take to be true national character, which they see as the product of history and environment, and mere “stereotypes” based on distorted representations of authentic Mexicanness or on unacceptable essentialist notions of character. Charles Flandrau is typical of this concern and devotes an entire chapter of his *Viva Mexico!* (1908) to the debunking of race stereotypes, a favorite topic of conversation among those whom he refers to as “fairly well educated ‘people in general.’” It is this group, he complains, that is forever divulging the news that “Englishmen have no sense of humor,” that “the French are very immoral,” that “all Italians steal and none of them wash,” that “every German eats with his knife and keeps his bedroom windows closed at night,” that “the inhabitants of Russia are barbarians with a veneer of civilization” . . . and that “the Scotch are stingy.” (34-35)

The usual perception of Mexicans, he says, is that they are “the laziest people in the world, and although they seem to treat you politely they are all treacherous and dishonest” (35). Flandrau’s purpose in the rest of the chapter is to show how wrong headed these ideas are, reminding his American readers, in order to demonstrate the dangers of national characterizations, that “From end to end of Europe the United States is, and for a long time has been, a synonym of political and financial corruption” (41). Flandrau’s method of debunking, however, is not to attack the idea of national character, but only those constructions of it that are based on the prejudiced assumption that “one’s own people . . . have a monopoly of all the virtues” (42).

His own notion of Mexican character is based not on an essentialist “Mexicanness,” but on historical and cultural causes. Most important, that character is susceptible to change. Mexicans are not inherently lazy, he explains, but he admits that in Mexico, “apparently the desire to get anything done does not exist” (43). There is, he thinks, a good reason for this. The Mexican’s lack of “energy” is due to cultural, climatic, and gastronomic causes. “It is not surprising,” he writes, “that a population perpetually in the throes of intestinal disorder should be somewhat lacking in energy” (44). A temperate climate, of course, does not help matters since it provides no incentive for sustained expenditures of energy. And a long colonial history under the Spanish, the main lesson of which was that other people should do the work, also



contributed to what Flandrau takes to be the ingrained nonchalance of Mexican attitudes toward labor. However, Flandrau's brand of environmental determinism, which he shares with almost all North American travel writers, insists that when these root causes change, the Mexicans will be absolved from "the popular reproach of laziness" (45).

As Flandrau's analysis of Mexican "laziness" demonstrates, the line between an essentializing stereotype and a more naturalistic construction of national character may occasionally look rather thin. The difference is that the jingoist's essentialist stereotype does not allow for individual variation from the type or for the type's susceptibility to change, whereas the naturalist's "national character" not only allows for both, it insists on them. North American writers, for the most part, are conscious that they are working against essentialist constructions of Mexican character, mostly negative ones, and it is partly their task, as they see it, to ameliorate that perception, to redraw the portrait in a more understanding, if not always more flattering, manner.

Surprisingly, at least to this reader, some of the Mexican writers have taken up the same project. In books written before 1836, defending the U.S. did not seem to be an issue of particular importance. Lorenzo de Zavala and Rafael Reynal both appear to be writing to an audience that held North Americans in generally high esteem. But after that date, and especially after 1846 (the beginning of the Mexican-American War), Mexican travel writers are clearly conscious of a perception of U.S. character that is anything but flattering to "*los yanquis*." Some of the writers, Justo Sierra most notably among them, share that negative perception. Others, however, do not.

Despite their worries about the ethics of national character construction, most nineteenth-century travel narratives by Mexicans do not hesitate to exclude particular groups from participation in the national character of North America. This does not mean that those people or groups are not treated at all in the texts. Quite the contrary, they are often featured in them. In works by Mexican authors, one can almost always find chapters or paragraphs devoted to North American Blacks, to the Shakers, to Native Americans, to the American woman, or to particular immigrant groups, but in none of them are these groups treated as representative of national character. In Zavala's travel narrative, for example, the author talks very sympathetically about the situation of North American slaves, but he remarks that they are "as different in color as they are in moral qualities from the others" (168) and he excludes all of New Orleans from his consideration of North American character because the "character of the people [in that city] is completely unlike that of the other cities of the United States" (11).

Other writers, such as González, posit the existence of a prototypical, character-generating geographical region that generates the only true exemplars of national character. As González puts it, "Just as the water in a great pond is shallower toward the edges, the character of a people is less defined, less specific, closer to its borders" (291). "Less defined," more hybridized, repugnant—these are all qualities of the people that González finds in the frontier regions, especially those living on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. As he says: in the "singular types" found in frontier cities like Los Angeles, the "two races struggle to



amalgamate themselves, without, apparently, either one of the two races winning." Their manners leave an impression of "something artificial and false. They say they are the... descendants of Mexicans, but when they open their mouths, the *patria* does not speak to my heart" (292). For González, the farther we get from the border, "the more we penetrate into the souls of nations. Look for the American soul in New England or in Virginia, in the same way that you would look for the Mexican soul in Jalisco, Guanajuato, Puebla, or the state of Mexico" (292-93).

Although travel writers differ considerably among themselves over North American character, constructions such as one González offers clearly continue to have ramifications for public policy and international relations today. His disparagement of frontier culture, for example, has an ironic echo in immigration legislation such as Proposition 187, enacted by the California legislature in 1994 to discourage Mexicans from entering that state illegally. A brief look at another example, from early in the nineteenth century, will demonstrate that the use of national character in the formation of immigration policy has a long pedigree in the U.S. and that at least some of its sources are Mexican. In 1834, Lorenzo de Zavala, traveling as a Mexican exile in North America, was profoundly disturbed by the pattern of revolution that seemed to be firmly entrenched in Mexican political life, as well as by the apparent impossibility of establishing a democracy in Mexico, in spite of its democratic institutions and constitution. The problem, as Zavala saw it, was Mexican character, and one of the central purposes of his travel narrative was to gather information about those aspects of North American character that allowed democracy to flourish. Once Mexicans possessed that information, he thought, they would have the necessary materials for building their own democratic habits. Zavala also believed, however, that the cultural bases underlying Mexican character were so entrenched that even if Mexicans knew the character habits they needed, they would be unable to modify their national character quickly enough to make democratic reforms successful in the near future.

Zavala, therefore, offered a quick fix. If Mexican character in the heartland was not amenable to rapid change, the same was not true of those zones where populations were still in flux. Zavala proposed colonizing the less populated Mexican lands with groups whose ethnicities were similar to those of Mexico's North American neighbors, that is, by North Americans themselves, and by Irish, German, British, and other northern European groups. According to Zavala, the ten thousand U.S. citizens who were currently settling each year in the northern Mexican states were bringing with them those habits of character—"freedom, economy, industry, ... austere and religious ways, ... individual independence and ... republicanism"—that must necessarily bring about a change in the "moral and material existence of the former inhabitants." Those areas, he reasoned, would flourish and prosper while their southern Mexican brothers, as a punishment "for their prejudices, their ignorance, and their superstition," would "continue in the grip of the military and ecclesiastical" alliance (212). Eventually, the differences between these two Mexicos would culminate in a civil war between the "debased generation, heir to Castilian traditions and beliefs" and the beneficiaries of those



new values being imported by immigrants from the U.S. and northern Europe. The outcome would be a "complete though bloody victory" of the American system (213).

I relate this oddly prophetic aspect of Zavala's travel narrative because ideas about national character and its relation to democracy underlie many arguments about immigration policy in the U.S. In the early twentieth century, racial purists feared that millions of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were changing the "face" of North American character. In 1921, the U.S. Congress responded to these fears by passing the Emergency Quota Act, which closed immigration to most Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Similar fears continue to infect U.S. rhetoric over Mexican immigration. Joseph Fallon, in an essay published this year entitled "The British Character of America," bewails the fact that "over 80 percent of legal immigration [to the U.S.] is from the Third World—the single largest source of both legal and illegal immigration is Mexico—whereas less than 20 percent is from Europe and Canada." According to Fallon and others who espouse Anglo-American race purity, a Mexican conspiracy is currently afoot to remold the U.S. as a Hispanic despotism. The effect will be "to replace the historic European-American majority population, which adopted the English language and British character of the United States, with a Third World majority population which will not." Fallon's fears, it seems clear, are founded on essentialist notions of national and racial character. According to his vision, the Mexicans who flow across the U.S.-Mexico border have no interest in coming here because of the rights, freedoms, economic opportunities, or political institutions that have made the country what it is today. They have come single-mindedly to impose on the U.S. their own retrograde national character and political habits. As Fallon sees it, the demographic *coup d'état* will occur around the year 2100, when the United States will have a "Hispanic" majority population and officially become an "Hispanic" country. At that time, the success of Jamestown will have been replaced by the failure of Santa Fe, the liberties under common law by the tyranny of the Inquisition and the First World by the Third World. And the United States will enter the new Dark Ages.

The fallacy of such reasoning as Fallon's is clear to anyone who gives it much thought. Even his evocation of history stands little scrutiny, as anyone familiar with Mexican history or the real fate of Jamestown and Santa Fe would know. The Inquisition is as incompatible with current Mexican culture as it is with U.S. culture, and Jamestown hardly constitutes evidence of the democratic foundations of British character or political institutions. But the problem is not merely that voices such as Fallon's are currently playing such a large role in U.S. rhetoric about immigration, but that those who oppose his racism, frightened by the specter it raises, have grown timid about saying anything at all about differences between the values and habits of different national groups, as though talking about them in any form constitutes a racist or national slur. Most of the travel narratives in the two traditions I have been talking about here demonstrate that that is not true. It would be to our advantage if we kept alive the dialogue that they have begun.



## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. N. York, Verso, 1994.
- Fallon, Joseph. "The British Character of America." *The Social Contract* (Winter 2001). <http://www.thesocialcontract.com/>
- Flandrau, Charles. *Viva Mexico!* London: Eland, 1990. First published in 1908 (N. York: Appleton).
- González Peña, Carlos. *La vida tumultuosa: seis semanas en los Estados Unidos*. México: Andres Botas e hijo, 1918. All translations are mine.
- Gunn, Drewey Wayne. *American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973*. Austin: U. of Texas P, 1974.
- Gunn, Drewey Wayne. *Mexico in American and British letters: a Bibliography of Fiction and Travel Books*. Metuchen, N. Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1974.
- Hunsaker, Steven V. *Autobiography and National Identity in the Americas*. Charlottesville: U. P. of Virginia, 1999.
- Lombardo, Alberto. *Los Estados Unidos: notas y episodios de viaje*. México: Imprenta y Fotolitografía de la Escuela Nacional de Artes y Oficios, 1884. All translations are mine.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *The Modern Theme*. Trans. James Cleugh. N. York: Harper and Row, 1961. This book was originally published in Spanish under the title *El tema de nuestro tiempo* in 1923.
- Paz, Octavio. *Labyrinth of Solitude and The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, The Philanthropic Ogre*. Trans. by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash. N. York: Grove, 1985. Orig. publ. as *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).
- Pratt, Mary L. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Reynal, Rafael and Carlos Gastelu. *Viage por los Estados Unidos del Norte: dedicado a los jóvenes Mexicanos de ambos sexos*. Cincinnati: E. Deming, 1834. All translations are mine.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Sierra, Justo. *En tierra yankee: notas a todo vapor*. In *Obras completas*. Vol. VI: *Viajes*. Ed. José Luis Martínez. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977. pp. 5-193. Originally published 1898. All translations are mine.
- Teixidor, Felipe. *Viajeros mexicanos: siglos XIX y XX*. Mexico: Ed. Letras de Mexico, 1939.
- Zavala, Lorenzo de. *Journey to the United States of North America*. Trans. by Wallace Woolsey. Austin, TX: Shoal Creek, 1980. Orig. publ. as *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de America* (1834).

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MEXICO-U.S. TRAVEL NARRATIVES

### Mexican Works

- Agustín, José. *Ciudades desiertas*. Mexico: Edivisión, 1982. (fiction)
- González Peña, Carlos. *La vida tumultuosa: seis semanas en los Estados Unidos*. México: Andres Botas e hijo, 1918.
- Ibargüengoitia, Jorge. *Viajes en la América ignota*. Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972.
- Lombardo, Alberto. *Los Estados Unidos: notas y episodios de viaje*. México: Imprenta y Fotolitografía de la Escuela Nacional de Artes y Oficios, 1884.
- Novo, Salvador. *Return Ticket*. Mexico: Editorial Cultura, 1928.



- *Continente Vacío* (1934). In *Viajes y Ensayos*. Vol. I. Letras Mexicanas. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996.
- Paz, Octavio. *Labyrinth of Solitude and The Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, The Philanthropic Ogre*. Trans. by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash. N. York: Grove, 1985. Orig. publ. as *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).
- Prieto, Guillermo. *Viaje a los Estados Unidos por Fidel*. Mexico: Imprenta de Dublan y Chavez, 1877-78.
- Reyes, Alfonso. *Viaje a California* (1941). In *Obras completas de Alfonso Reyes*. XXIV. *Memorias*, Colección Letras Mexicanas. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990. pp. 95-116.
- Reynal, Rafael and Carlos Gastelu. *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte*. Cincinnati: E. Deming, 1834.
- Sierra, Justo. *En tierra yankee: notas a todo vapor*. In *Obras completas*. Vol. VI: *Viajes*. Ed. José Luis Martínez. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977. pp. 5-193. Originally published 1898.
- Sierra O'Reilly, Justo. *Impresiones de un Viaje a los Estados Unidos de América y Canadá*. Campeche: Gregorio Buenfil, 1850.
- *Diario de nuestro viaje a los Estados Unidos* (1848)
- Vasconcelos, José. *Visiones Californianas*. In *Divagaciones literarias*. Mexico: Lectura selecta, 1919.
- Zavala, Lorenzo de. *Journey to the United States of North America*. Trans. by Wallace Woolsey. Austin, TX: Shoal Creek, 1980. Orig. publ. as *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de America* (1834).

#### *U.S. Works*

- Bullock, William. *Six Months' Residence and Travels in Mexico*. London: J. Murray, 1824.
- Burroughs, William. *Queer* (1953). N. York: Penguin, 1985.
- Calderón de la Barca, Frances Erskine Inglis. *Life in Mexico during a Residence of Two Years in That Country*. Boston: Little, Brown. 1843.
- Cassel, Jonathan. *Lacandon Adventure: The Last of the Maya*. San Antonio: Naylor, 1974.
- Castaneda, Carlos. *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972.
- Cohan, Tony. *On Mexican Time: A New Life in San Miguel*. New York: Broadway Books, 2000.
- Dana, Richard Henry. *Two Years Before the Mast*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1840.
- Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. *The Mexican Night*. New York: New Directions, 1970.
- Flandrau, Charles. *Viva Mexico!* London: Eland, 1990. First published New York: Appleton, 1908.
- Kerouac, Jack. *Lonesome Traveler*. N. York: McGraw Hill, 1960.
- Morris, Mary. *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- O'Shaughnessy, Edith Louise Coues. *Diplomatic Days*. New York: Harper, 1917.
- *A Diplomat's Wife in Mexico*. New York: Harper, 1916.
- Pindell, Terry. *Yesterday's Train: A Rail Odyssey through Mexican History*. New York: Holt, 1997.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Days Before*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952.
- *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings*. New York: Delacorte, 1970.

- Reed, John. *Insurgent Mexico*. New York: D. Appleton, 1914.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Sea of Cortez*. N. York: Viking, 1941.
- Stephens, John Lloyd. *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. New York: Harper, 1841.
- . *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. New York, Harper, 1843.
- Urrea, Luis Alberto. *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Wright, Ronald. *Time among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico*. New York: Holt, 1991.